

The sermon “When the desert blooms”
From Matthew 11:2-11
By Rev. Peter Blank
At Plymouth Presbyterian Church
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This Sunday is called *Gaudete* (pronounced *gau-day-tay*) —*Rejoice*. Purple gives way to a rose candle. Isaiah dares to proclaim, “*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom.*” Mary sings of a world turned upside down by God’s mercy in the other gospel reading for this day.

And then—almost cruelly—our Gospel reading drops us into a prison cell.



The Baptist in Prison by Giusto de' Menabuoi

On “Rejoice Sunday”, Matthew gives us John the Baptist in chains.

Joy is hard to find behind those bars. John is not imprisoned for a lack of faith or courage, but for telling the truth. Now, alone and forgotten, he wonders whether his entire life has been a mistake. The Messiah he announced has not done what John expected. No axe at the root. No fire. No sweeping justice.

So John sends a question that sounds less like theology and more like heartbreak:

“Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?”

In other words: *“Lord, has it all been for nothing?”*

If anyone had earned certainty, it was John the baptizer. His story began with angels and prophecy. He leapt in his mother’s womb. He baptized Jesus. He gave everything to his calling before he was thirty.

And now his story moves backward—from confidence to doubt, from clarity to confusion, from wilderness preaching to prison silence.

Jesus does not scold John for his question. He does not correct him. He does not demand stronger faith. Instead, he says:

“Go and tell John what you see and hear.”

Not arguments. Not explanations. Stories. The blind see. The lame walk. The poor receive good news.

Jesus does not offer John a theory of redemption. Jesus offers him testimony. Because who Jesus is cannot be reduced to slogans or certainty. His identity emerges quietly—in healing bodies, restored dignity, and lives touched at the margins.

And here is the hard truth: those stories never become John’s own. He is not freed. He is not vindicated. He dies violently and seemingly without purpose.

If that unsettles you, it should.

We follow a crucified Messiah, yet we often rush past doubt and suffering, trying to make God “okay.” But this story is not okay. Some prisons do not open. Some questions are not answered. Some deserts stay dry longer than we think they should.

And Jesus says, *“Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”*

To take offense is to flee. It is to demand resolution before we stay present. But faith sometimes means remaining with what is unresolved. Staying put. Refusing to abandon God—or one another—when the story breaks our hearts.

John did everything right and still suffered. His story exposes the lie of transactional faith—the idea that obedience guarantees safety or success. It reminds us that faith is not meant to anesthetize our pain or tidy our grief.

Maybe God is more present in the desert than in our polished answers.

Advent invites us to make room for doubt, grief, and longing—not as failures of faith, but as honest responses to a broken world. To let joy be joy and sorrow be sorrow. To feel deeply, because God does.

Here's the irony: the Church remembers John the Baptist as a patron saint of joy.

Not because he escaped suffering—but because joy, in a prison cell, is not sentimentality. It is trust without guarantees. It is longing that refuses to die.

John's desert did not bloom in the way he expected. But it bloomed nonetheless—because his hope was never wasted. His story did not end in silence. It ended in God.

“Are you the one who is to come?” John asked.

“What do you see, what to do you hear? You decide,” Jesus replied.

And the Church answers: **Yes.** Even now: **Yes.**

Christ has come. Christ is coming. Christ will never stop coming.
And even when the desert blooms slowly—**we have not hoped in vain.**

